

VZCZCXRO8259
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHKH #0822/01 1531335
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 011335Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0943
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KHARTOUM 000822

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KSCA](#) [OTRA](#) [EAID](#) [CDC](#) [SU](#)

SUBJECT: AEC VISITS DEVASTATED ABYEI TOWN AND REFUGEES

REF: A) KHARTOUM 777; B) KHARTOUM 806

1. (U) Summary: An Assessment and Evaluation Committee (AEC) delegation visited Abyei and associated refugee sites May 28 to view the effects of recent fighting between Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) units in that town. Abyei is now completely under the control of SAF forces, and much of the town has been burned to the ground. Armed civilians and SAF patrols were observed walking the streets, which were littered with looted household belongings. UNMIS members spoke of frustrations over limits on their movements and even on their reporting that prevent them from effectively keeping the peace. The AEC delegation also visited Agok town, where most of the Dinka refugees fled, and spoke with representatives of international relief NGOs. NGO reps said two of their biggest immediate needs are the establishment of a humanitarian "no-fly zone" above the town (i.e., an end to harassment by SAF Antonovs circling the town), and the need to open roads north of Abyei to allow shipments of relief supplies. The team also spoke with representatives of the SPLM/A, and the Dinka and Messeriya communities. The AEC delegation came away convinced once again (see reftels) that UNMIS or new Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) of combined SAF and SPLA troops must be allowed freedom of movement throughout the Abyei area, as the local situation remains extremely volatile. SAF forces control the town, but unless they are replaced by UNMIS forces, the town could be the scene of renewed fighting by SPLA units to drive them out. END SUMMARY

UNAMIS forces frustrated by controls

2. (U) The high-level AEC delegation -- including GoNU foreign minister and SPLM polit-bureau member Deng Alor, ambassadors of the Netherlands, UK, Italy, Norway, France (representing EU Presidency), and the African Union, a political officer from the U.S. Embassy, representatives of the NCP, and AEC chairman Derek Plumbly -- arrived in Abyei aboard a Russian-piloted UN helicopter for the start of a one-day tour of the area. A meeting with UNMIS commanders and forces opened the day's agenda. Members of UNMIS spoke of their many frustrations in carrying out their mission, including the fact that the town had been burned and looted right on the other side of the fence demarcating their compound. AEC members were struck by the fact that many of the troops they spoke with had never been in the town. Special Envoy Richard Williamson was informed during a tour he made of Abyei on May 30 that only African members of the UNMIS force in Abyei were being allowed by the SAF to make patrols into the town, further limiting the ability of UNMIS to carry out its mission.

3. (U) The UNMIS commander described the situation in Abyei town as "tense," with SAF soldiers in control. The commander said the town had been burned and looted by "suspected Messeriya" tribesman (a charge later denied by Messeriya leaders, but confirmed to Ambassador Williamson on May 30th by UNMIS). The troops described a situation where their ability to patrol and monitor the area was subject to on-again, off-again restrictions by the SAF. Even their ability to report on what they observe is hampered. One female African soldier reported that "you're only supposed to report what is 'comfortable,' otherwise your report can just be thrown away. And that was a contributing factor in the escalation" of tensions and violence," she said.

14. (U) Another officer noted that, with "one faction" (SAF) in control of the town, this amounts to an open invitation for "other factions" to return to fight them. It would be best if UNMIS were allowed to take control as a neutral force, he concluded.

Tour of the town: Armed men wander the charred ruins

15. (U) The AEC delegation was then given a drive-through tour of the town escorted by armored UNMIS vehicles. It was clear that nearly all of the population had fled. The tour crossed paths with several SAF foot patrols. Very few women and no children were seen, and no civilians at all were observed by the Williamson delegation on May 30th. The dirt streets were littered with large heaps of looted belongings, mostly beds and chairs, from the traditional round straw-roofed residences. All high value items had already been carried away. No vehicles undamaged by the fighting were observed left in the town, for instance. (Comment: Since the SAF was clearly in control of the town, the looting had been carried out with at least their consent, if not outright participation.) Many, if not most, of the homes had been burned down. The entire market area in particular was destroyed and lay in ruins. Walking the streets were civilian men, many armed with firearms or the occasional spear or ancient sword, or even just a stick. No civilians were observed in the town at all on May 30th.

Agok town is now a refugee camp

16. (U) Following a one-hour helicopter flight, the delegation saw firsthand many of the IDP victims of the Abyei fighting at Agok

KHARTOUM 00000822 002 OF 003

town, where many of the Dinka community had fled. (Dinkas tended to flee south, with the considerably smaller Messeriya IDPs fleeing north.) Hundreds of refugees milled around the dirt landing strip. Representatives of the NGO humanitarian relief agencies - some of whom had fled Abyei themselves - briefed the delegation. For the time being, the agencies are providing adequate services to the refugees - each family receives a plastic sheet for shelter, two mosquito nets, and a ration of food. The agencies are drawing on provisions they had pre-positioned in the area to the south in anticipation of a repeat of last year's serious flooding.

17. (U) The relief workers told how they are working hard to locate about 100 children reported missing by their parents after their arrival in Agok. Also, about 50 children had arrived unaccompanied. A further 50 children have now been reunited with their families. About one-third of the IDPs in Agok are children aged five or under.

18. (U) The NGO representatives expressed two immediate needs: First, the need to create a humanitarian no-fly zone over the IDP camps to end harassment by circling flights of Antonovs of the Sudanese Air Force. These flights often scatter frightened refugees back into the bush, making them much harder to assist. Second, the GoNU must begin allowing relief agencies to move relief supplies in by road from the north. The area's main road links are to the north, and the SAF prevents the relief agencies from using that route. Currently, the agencies have few supplies they can move in from the south, a much more difficult and expensive route. The relief representatives stressed that the rainy season had already begun in the area, gradually putting more isolated groups of refugees beyond reach of assistance. Another need is for the two area airstrips to be upgraded so they will be usable during the rainy season.

SPLM, Dinka leaders make plea for protection

19. (U) At a separate site in Agok, the AEC delegation met with representatives of the SPLM, SPLA, and other leaders of the Dinka community. The chief spokesman was Kwal Deng, the brother of SPLM leader Luka Biong Deng. Deng spoke eloquently and passionately, saying Dinkas and the SPLA/M (he was apparently speaking for both)

had long worked with the Messeriya community to promote peaceful co-existence. What had happened in Abyei, he charged, was deliberately planned by the SAF. The NCP had long declared its intention of "cleansing" the Abyei area, he said, to leave the Messeriya in control. Deng and other community leaders spoke bitterly of the failure of UNMIS forces to protect the population. The SPLM handed out a position paper urging members of the international community to demand the immediate withdrawal of SAF from Abyei, to intervene in Abyei under the UN charter, and for the GoNU to fully and immediately implement the Abyei protocol and the ABC border North-South demarcation as stipulated in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Messeriya Leaders: We were not involved

¶10. (U) Following another one hour helicopter flight to the town of Muglad north of Abyei, the AEC delegation next met with leaders of the Misseriya community. In contrast to Agok, there was no visible evidence of a refugee community. Messeriya leaders claimed that local families had provided accommodations for the relatively smaller number of refugees who had headed north.

¶11. (U) Messeriya leaders stressed their peaceful intentions, referring to the Dinka refugees as their brothers who were in dire need of assistance. Everyone who spoke insisted that Messeriya had taken no part in any of the violence and looting that had taken place. After the meeting had formally broken up and the delegation was heading back to the airstrip, French Ambassador Christine Robichon scolded the Messeriyap ;Q(Q to participate in the fighting and the looting.

¶12. (U) Significantly, Messeriya leaders had no clear answer when they were asked, repeatedly, what actions needed to take place before the IDPs could return to a peaceful Abyei. The closest one came was to say that there were two possible solutions - one political, between "the two sides," the other "social". Another said "we ask only that you support us so that things can return to normal." The meeting concluded with one headman's assertion that "I am sure we will reach a solution. No Messeriya took part in that situation."

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Abyei was a powder keg waiting to explode given the close proximity of SAF and SPLA forces and the lack of a true buffer zone or civil administration in the region to regulate police and other civic functions. The recent attempt by the GOSS to

KHARTOUM 00000822 003 OF 003

establish a Southern Governor for Abyei, and the NCP attempt to establish a counter administration through Messeriya proxy forces, only made the situation more tense. Although the spark that set off the explosion of violence did not appear to have been planned, and both sides can share in the blame, the result has allowed the NCP to sweep the town completely clear of its formerly large Southern population.

¶14. (SBU) Comment Continued: The AEC delegates were struck by the destruction in Abyei, and the resulting human misery that the NGO community is struggling to address. The delegation did not attempt to pin down responsibility for what had taken place. Instead, they asked what needed to be done to stabilize the situation and allow refugees to return to their homes in a peaceful situation. Dinka, SPLM and UNMIS sources agreed that UNMIS forces should take over security in Abyei town to remove the immediate cause for additional violence. The SPLM (which is to say, the Dinka community leadership) is adamant that the ABC report should be implemented immediately as part of a longer-term solution, as called for in the CPA. As for improving the lot of the IDPs, the NCP seems to hold all the cards: Only they can concede a no-fly humanitarian zone over the refugee camps, and only they can allow the NGOs to move in supplies from the north. During the May 28 meetings, NCP representatives had very little to say. Embassy has heard that the NCP now wants to augment the visit with additional meetings in Khartoum. Embassy will continue to press the case that Abyei remains a very volatile situation that needs urgent action, by both parties, to defuse. Providing adequate security in the town so that

IDPs can safely return, either through a new UNMIS mandate or through the installation of new Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) of combined northern and southern troops, or both, is a paramount requirement.

POWERS